OPINION

P-I Focus: Plan Uses Technology to Help the Homeless
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"Doreen" enters the child care center with baby in arms and toddler in tow. She pokes her head into an office and wearily asks a nurse to take a look at the kids because they've been sick. Reluctantly, she heads off to a housing agency to fill out the paperwork that she hopes will get her out of an emergency shelter and into a more stable living environment. When Doreen returns several hours later, she is even more exhausted.

"Do I have to fill out these same forms over and over again?" she questions pleadingly. Her voice is tinged with guilt and exasperation over leaving her sick kids. Doreen is plainly frustrated with the obstacles she has faced while urgently trying to obtain housing and other needed help.

Wendy Wahman/P-I

Rain has begun to fall, and the afternoon is fading toward a chilly, wet evening. "Bob," a middle-aged Vietnam veteran, came to Seattle in search of work but has had no success; now he's homeless. One emergency shelter turned him away because he did not meet its criteria. Another is full. Where to go? What to do? Who can help? He shrugs, shoulders his knapsack and heads off to stake out a spot under an overpass where he will spend another cold, damp night.

Nationwide, most communities tackling homelessness have developed ways to manage this stubborn problem but have not found the resources to prevent or end it. In Seattle, spending to address homelessness has significantly increased in recent years but so has the problem.

Increasingly, federal and state cutbacks are shifting more of the financial burden for fighting homelessness to the local level. Operation Nightwatch's one-night street count found 1,085 people, including many women and children, sheltering themselves under Seattle bridges and in cars, parks and alleys. While many of King County's shelters and short-term transitional housing facilities (about 4,000 spaces in all) are consistently full, there just are not enough beds to meet the needs of the county's estimated 6,500 homeless population. And sadly, some shelter beds go empty every night because homeless people can't find the ones that are available.

Clearly, new approaches are called for. This year, our region is embarking on an innovative plan -- called Safe Harbors -- that brings high-tech tools to bear on this complex problem. This promising step will directly benefit homeless people, allow more efficient use of resources and maximize tax dollars and other funding.

The Seattle City Council has approved $680,000 to launch Safe Harbors, a broadly based community project sponsored by the city in partnership with King County and United Way of King County.

The goal is to implement a countywide, computerized information and referral system that will knit together the hundreds of independent shelters and social-service agencies into a seamless

system of resources and support. By design, Safe Harbors is outcome-based and should give us the information needed to reduce the problem, not just manage it.

Once Safe Harbors is in place, here is how it will work:

No longer will the weary mother have to tell her traumatic story over and over. When she first walks into an emergency shelter, a caseworker will enter her information into a computer to determine her eligibility for food stamps, counseling, job training and health care for her children, and search a list of housing resources. With the mother's permission, the caseworker will share the eligibility data with other service providers. A week later, the mother and children could move into longer-term family housing where they can receive the help needed to stabilize their lives.

The Vietnam veteran will walk into a public building where he can access an electronic kiosk to check the Safe Harbors information system for nearby service providers for homeless people. Within minutes, he will be in contact with a caseworker, who will search the Safe Harbors database to find him a shelter with an available bed for the night.

These scenarios are not possible now. But with Safe Harbors in place, every available shelter bed and other services in the county can be located and matched immediately with people seeking help.

Safe Harbors project partners, with a community advisory committee and consultants, have designed a framework with concrete benefits for homeless people, service providers and funders. Driving the design is the urgent need to provide greater access to available services, to generate sound data to guide planning and to empower system users by expanding access to information.

Safe Harbors addresses basic problems:

- An improved and enhanced real-time Internet database of information directories on resources and programs will allow a homeless person or caseworker to find help quickly through computers at shelters, health clinics and certain public buildings. The "eligibility wizard" aspect of the system will allow a homeless person to check eligibility criteria and download forms to complete and talk with an authorized caseworker, who can further assist the homeless client. Safe Harbors will enable service providers to voluntarily participate in a broad case-management network. With a client's permission, agencies can share confidential information electronically to make referrals and provide a more comprehensive array of services. People seeking help will no longer have to tell their stories repeatedly.

- To reduce homelessness, we need more complete and comprehensive data on the populations served (women and children, elderly, the mentally ill and people with other disabilities) and how well we meet their needs. The new system will provide reliable data to public and private funders, planners and service providers to guide decisions about where resources should be allocated. The information will also help greatly in advocating for additional funding by showing where gaps exist in assisting homeless populations.

- Accurate information is critical to effective coordinated service delivery, but safeguarding the privacy of homeless clients is essential. Before forwarding client intake and referral information to the centralized database, the provider will strip the record of all identifiers (name and Social Security number) and assign a unique number code to guarantee anonymity.

More than 60 homeless people participated in focus groups on the Safe Harbors proposal. Some are leery about potential invasions of privacy; others think data gathering is fine if it will speed access to needed services. Some are surprised that we don't have comprehensive data.

No system is perfect, and Safe Harbors does not promise to be a cure-all for homelessness. Over the past year, the Safe Harbors Advisory Committee, including many service providers, homeless people and government staff, have addressed important concerns, including privacy issues and the use of data. Their advice has been incorporated into the system design developed by Donna H. Friedman and her colleagues at the Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts.

Safe Harbors will not take money away from any current programs serving homeless people. Rather, it will better direct current funding and open the door to new government and private dollars.

In fact, Congress has mandated that within three years, all cities that receive federal funding for homeless programs must be begin collecting systemwide data on which to base planning decisions. Boston, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Santa Monica, Calif., and other localities have implemented such programs with notable success. In addition, the National Alliance to End

Homelessness has identified the collection of data using systems such as Safe Harbors as a top priority for ultimately ending homelessness. Our Safe Harbors plan is highly innovative for its broad scope and city, county, United Way and community partnership.

In Seattle-King County, the concepts embodied in the Safe Harbors system design have been advocated by virtually every homeless people's advisory commission since 1994. Many service providers are enthusiastic about this new tool, which will help them more quickly assist people in need.

Twenty years ago, homelessness was nowhere near the problem it is today. In the world's richest country, it is well within our grasp to end homelessness The existing assistance system needs to become more humane, less bureaucratic and outcome-driven by tailoring solution-oriented approaches to the varying situations of the people needing assistance. We must work together toward ending homelessness instead of just accepting and managing it.